How to Study Philosophy

An Introduction

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This guide is designed for students new to the study of philosophy. It seeks to introduce them to the rudiments of informal logic, critical thinking, and analytical writing. It seeks to combine a treatment of these skills into a single text that can be used concurrently with a set of philosophical readings. I hope teachers looking for a short textbook that can replace both longer texts in critical thinking or informal logic and texts in writing or rhetoric will find this module of value.

Students commonly approach philosophy without a good sense of what they’re getting into. Accustomed to forming and holding opinions for no particular reason, prey to the confusions of American mass culture, they expect to spend their time expressing their opinions or insisting on their feelings, without any self-criticism or genuine willingness to entertain the possibility that they might after all be mistaken, and that they might learn something from reading or listening to someone else.

Thus the spirit of this guide is not at all postmodern. That is, it takes for granted that philosophy (indeed that any honest inquiry) aims at truth, and that we get truth when a knowing subject conforms its beliefs to the way the world is. This is itself a philosophical claim, and therefore open to criticism, but I think it true, defensible, and, moreover, a useful starting point when one sets out to learn the art of thinking. The units begin with brief quotations from philosophers of the early modern period. These quotations bear in some way on the material covered in the unit they introduce, and perhaps students will be thereby encouraged to read some of the books from which the quotations come. Those whose philosophical sensibilities are modern, classical or medieval will, I trust, find the module useful and congenial. Those whose sensibilities are postmodern are invited to enjoy themselves as they deconstruct yet another sad remnant of the modern world.
SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

GENERAL REFERENCE
Edwards, Paul, ed. The Encyclopedia of Philosophy. New York: Macmillan and The Free Press, 1967. [This is often a useful place to begin work on a research paper. The articles are arranged alphabetically by topic, and they will both orient you on the material and suggest further reading. You ought not to use the Encyclopedia as your sole or even principal source of information, but it is a valuable research tool.]

HISTORIES OF PHILOSOPHY
Copleston, F. C. A History of Philosophy. Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday Image, 1964. [A comprehensive and reliable general history of Western philosophy. Copleston concentrates on the conclusions philosophers reach and usually sketches the principal arguments they advance for those conclusions. His volumes are a good supplement to the historical articles in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy.]

STUDENT ANTHOLOGIES OF PRIMARY TEXTS
Boyer, John W. and Julius Kirshner, eds. Readings in Western Civilization. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986. [The nine volumes in this series contain literary, political, and scientific texts as well as philosophical ones. Titles of the individual volumes are: The Greek Polis; Rome: Late Republic and Principate; The Church in the Roman Empire; Medieval Europe; The Renaissance; Early Modern Europe: Crisis of Authority; The Old Regime and the French Revolution; Nineteenth Century Europe: Liberalism and Its Critics; Twentieth Century Europe.]


Matthews, Michael R., ed. The Scientific Background to Modern Philosophy. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 1989. [This anthology collects scientific texts that represent the transition from Aristotelian to modern forms of explanation—including selections from the works of Aristotle, Copernicus, Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, Huygens, and Newton.]


**Philosophical Problems**


DeMarco, Joseph P. Moral Theory: A Contemporary Overview. Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1996. [DeMarco offers a survey of moral theory, applied ethics, and various approaches to practical reasoning. He pays particular attention to some of the more recent work professional philosophers have done in these areas.]


**READ**ING AND **WRITING**


Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. [Another useful manual of format and uniform style. This book also contains a chapter on writing with a computer.]

**LOGIC AND CRITICAL THINKING**


Jason, Gary. *Introduction to Logic.* Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1994. [A fine general introduction to logic and critical thinking, broader in scope and less technical than Heil’s book.]